Mikael M. Karlsson (b. 1943) is professor emeritus of philosophy at the University of Iceland (UI). Born and raised in the United States, he emigrated to Iceland in the early 1970s to join a couple of young philosophers in developing a newly founded a philosophy program at UI, the only university in Iceland at the time. Since then, Mikael has had a profound influence on academic philosophy in his adopted homeland through his teaching, research, and leadership. The purpose of this review is to provide insight into the content and value of this timely anthology of selected works authored by Mikael. The book is of interest not only to readers familiar with, or interested in, philosophy in Iceland, but more importantly to anyone drawn to the profound philosophical issues Mikael probes in these essays. It constitutes in my view a remarkable contribution to philosophical research on a broad range of topics, including philosophy of law, philosophy of mind, aesthetics, philosophy of action, ethics, and Aristotle interpretation. It demonstrates not only the breadth and variety of Mikael's philosophical interests but also his unique talents: An acute analytical mind, attention to detail, vast and authentic knowledge, creative intelligence, and brilliant sense of humor.

The book opens with prefaces by editor Elmar Geir Unnsteinsson and Mikael separately, each printed both in Icelandic and English. It moves on to an interview with Mikael from 2012, where he discusses his personal, educational and professional path. The interview is followed by 12 essays, four in Icelandic and eight in English. Except for one essay, "Aristotle's Woolen Axe", all these works have been published before, the earliest in 1988 and the latest in 2015.

Five essays are either about, or make significant use of, Aristotle's works, which, as Mikael states in the interview, he began studying seriously only after he started teaching in Iceland. In these five essays, Mikael argues that (1) contrary to popular opinion, Aristotle did indeed use experimental and other empirical methods in his natural philosophy[1]; (2) Aristotle's approach helps us avoid confusion about the relationship between general and particular norms[2]; (3) Aristotle's physics provides criteria for natural motions that shed a promising light on problems in action theory, formulated but unsatisfactorily dealt with by Fred Dretske and Donald Davidson[3]; (4) Aristotle's conceptual tools and philosophical vision provide a "sound and thoroughly modern" foundation for understanding the relationship between body and soul[4]; and (5) Aristotle's understanding of human and non-human nature, as well as some of his definitional techniques, help clarify questions involving

both aesthetics and action theory, discussed here under the heading “Could Rabbits Dance?”

A second theme in the book, partially overlapping with the first, is action theory. In “Agency and Patiency” (#3 above) and in “Action, Causation and Description”, Mikael criticizes and improves upon accounts provided by Dretske and Davidson. This theme may also be stretched to include “Do We Think with Our Brains?”, where an extensive discussion of perception involves considerations about agency and a critical engagement with the works of both Dretske and Davidson in the philosophy of mind and action.

A third theme in the book is exegesis and philosophical exploration of significant figures in the history of philosophy. This includes “Efi, skynsemi og kartesísk endurhæfing”, originally presented at a conference in 1975 as “Doubt, Reason, and Cartesian Therapy”, offering a novel and tightly argued interpretation of Descartes’ method. It also includes “Reason, Passion, and the Influencing Motives of the Will”, arguing that Hume’s account of moral motivation has many advantages over contemporary accounts. And since this theme of engagement with historical figures also includes much of the material included under the first theme of Aristotelian studies, it must be considered a dominant theme in this collection.

The remaining three essays are not as easily classified under the themes above. What two of them have in common is their relevance to law and legal frameworks. “Smáræða” is a short paper, based on a 1989 presentation, arguing (in Aristotelian spirit) that because size and form are interdependent, it is unwise for a tiny society like Iceland to adopt institutional frameworks unthinkingly from much larger nations. Mikael offers this consideration as an argument for revising the Icelandic constitution. In “Roots of Legal Normativity”, Mikael considers how it is possible for the passing of a law to create a binding norm. Here, he makes novel use of Kant’s distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives to clarify what it is to be bound by a norm. In the third remaining essay, “Náttúran sem skepna” (“Nature as Creature”), Mikael considers whether regarding nature as created might lend support to the view that nature and natural things may have intrinsic value, independent of any awareness or appreciation by conscious beings.

The constraints of a short review preclude critical engagement with all the nuances of this massive collection, so a few words on overall strengths and limitations will have to suffice. I

consider Mikael's philosophical achievements in these essays to be of the highest quality no matter what comparison is used. In terms of methods and style, they are invariably tightly argued, abundantly filled with detailed reasoning that leaves no stone unturned and hence manages to probe ever deeper into the topics under discussion. They exhibit an unusual critical acumen in identifying lacunae in extant philosophical accounts, and creative ingenuity in suggesting better ways forward. The occasional comic relief helps the reader follow Mikael's arduous path toward deeper understanding, but the magnetism of the argumentative process itself also keeps the pages turning. The method is always analytical with clarity and carefulness as dominant characteristics.

Another major strength of this collection is the sustained effort to approach current and perennial philosophical questions from a solid Aristotelian background and in doing so, demonstrating the relevance of Aristotle's works to contemporary philosophy. It is commonplace to recognize Aristotle's ethics and even political philosophy in this way, but what is notable about Mikael's work is that he is mostly engaged with what Aristotle has to say about subjects like biology, physics, metaphysics, and psychology. Mikael's treatment of Aristotle's works in these areas is never superficial; on the contrary, he manages, through close and thorough examination of the texts, to reveal a compelling vision, methodology, and conceptual apparatus that proves surprisingly fruitful when applied to problems in contemporary philosophy. Mikael's remarkable talent for reading historical philosophers closely and on their own terms is also readily apparent in the essays on Descartes and Hume. There, his compelling reading goes against the grain of standard, or at least stereotypical, interpretations.

It is difficult to identify weaknesses in Mikael's work, but one limitation will be noted. Although it's generally a strength, attention to detail can sometimes be accompanied by a tendency toward lengthy discussions to deal comprehensively with issues that arise from the main line of argument. In my view, some of the chapters might have been more effective if shortened, even at the expense of completeness, or split up so that a new essay would be devoted to a sub-argument currently placed within the first one. There are several examples where this might apply, but an obvious case in point is the 2023 Appendix to "Aristotle's Woolen Axe", adding 50 pages to the original 20-page paper. Here, the new and remarkable material, added 25 years after the original was composed, is more than enough for an independent piece on a topic that is separate from, even if arising out of, the earlier one.

This collection of top-quality philosophical works should be of interest to a wide range of philosophers, corresponding to the broad range of topics addressed. It is relevant to current issues in the philosophy of mind and action, philosophy of law, ethics, aesthetics, and the interpretation of Aristotle, Descartes, and Hume. The essays vary a bit in density, meaning that some will be on the heavy side for general readers and undergraduates while others (e.g. “Smáræða”, the interview, “Could Rabbits Dance”, and the original part of “Aristotle’s Woolen Axe”) may be widely accessible. Professional philosophers and graduate students will find the whole book useful and interesting.

Overall, this remarkable book contains outstanding contributions of highest quality to a great number of philosophical debates and issues. It is also a testament to how Mikael M. Karlsson has developed and applied his talents, demonstrating to the rest of us how careful philosophical analysis, together with a serious reading of primary sources, can lighten up new avenues for understanding. Being a unique role model, it is no surprise that as a teacher and mentor, he has exerted such an enormous influence on generations of philosophers educated in Iceland and beyond.

Endnotes

[1] Þungir þankar: Um aflfræði Aristótelesar (Heavy thoughts: On Aristotle’s Mechanics)

[2] Defeating the Inference from General to Particular Norms

[3] Agency and Patiency: Back to Nature?

[4] Aristotle’s Woolen Axe: Some Thoughts about the Embodiment of Life and Mind